

General Introduction to
ISLAM

LIFE IS A JOURNEY
BOOK 1



Sheikh Ali Tantawi

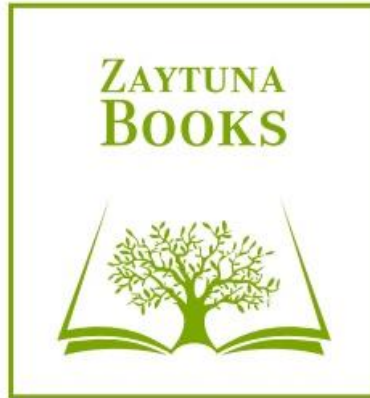
General Introduction To Islam

Life Is A Journey (Book 1)

Shaikh Ali Al-Tantawi

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Life is A Journey (Book 1)

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About the Author

Shaik Ali Mustafa Al-Tantawi is an Islamic Scholar, who was born June 12, 1909, in Damascus, Syria. At an early age his education was not restricted to Islamic sciences, he attended formal schools, which were introduced by the west, to learn all other sciences and that combination of education made him unique at his time and had given him extra qualities which other didn't have. He graduated from the university in 1933 with a degree in law, then served as a teacher in different parts of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon until 1940, during that time he was also involved in political activities supporting the struggle for independence against the French and British colonialism. In 1941, he started a new career that enriched further his intellect and experience, he became a judge and civil laws reviser for more than twenty years in Syria and Egypt.

"In 1963, he moved to Saudi Arabia where he taught for some years at the Shari'a and Arabic Language Colleges in Riyadh and Makkah, before dedicating his time to writing full time, counseling and preaching activities. Shaikh Tantawi's efforts to spread the spiritual and cultural values of Islam in a simple and compelling manner extended over several decades. He impressed a vast audience with his rich knowledge, wisdom and moderation. He hosted a daily radio program and a weekly television program continuously for 25 years, and both of them were extremely popular."¹

He authored more than 25 books in history, biography and contemporary matters. "General Introduction to Islam" is a popular book, published more than thirty times since 1969 and been translated to more than 10 languages. The approach of this book is distinctive, it addresses topics related to God and Islam based on reason side to side with verses from the Quran and highlights from the life of the prophet Mohamed in a systematic and simple language, targeting a wide spectrum of audience.

Shaik Ali died June 18, 1999 in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, due to a heart disease which caused him to be admitted to hospital several times before he remained in the intensive care unit and passed away.

¹ <http://kfip.org/sheikh-ali-at-tantawi/>

Life is a Journey

If you are travelling alone on a road, that splits at the end into two paths. The first is very difficult to walk, full of rocks and hidden dangers, and takes you through a steep hill. However, the authorities have put up a sign at the beginning of the path, says:

“Although this path looks hard, it will take you to the right destination.”

The second path is well-paved, full of beautiful trees and flowers, and there are plenty of cafes and places on the side for enjoyment and entertainment, where your desires will certainly be fully satisfied. But the sign says:

“This is a dangerous and destructive path, it will not take you to the correct destination, and will surely end with death.”

Which path would you choose? There is no doubt that the human’s nature tends to follow the easy way, the enjoyable one that has no pain, and no restrictions. It is an instinct embedded in human’s nature by God, and if mankind to be guided merely by his instinct and desires, he will undoubtedly select the second path. However, the human mind intervenes, and compares the path with enjoyment, short-lived pleasure followed by suffering and pain, with the other path, temporary pain and hardship, followed by eternal joy and happiness, and hopefully the mind will choose the first path.

Likewise, the path to paradise and the path to hellfire. The road to hellfire is full of desires and temptations. Such as looking at the body of beautiful woman, or having an affair with someone, or gaining wealth through bribes, cheating and lying. Mankind loves freedom without boundaries and hates to be restrained. On the other side, the path to paradise is similar to climbing a steep hill, it has boundaries, it requires self-control, self-discipline, and resistance to desires. However, this path eventually leads to ultimate and eternal pleasure in the life after.²It's like a student when preparing for an exam, he needs discipline to study, to avoid distractions

² In Islam, you are allowed and encouraged to fulfil your desires, but in a permissible way. For example, Islam prohibits adultery, but encourages marriage.

and to stay focused. Although it is painful, the outcome will be success and happiness once the student sees the results.

God created in us an instinct to distinguish between the two paths, and to recognize good and evil. Everyone has this conscience, the educated and the illiterate, the old and the young. All of them would feel comfortable when doing something good, and would feel worried and guilty when doing something bad. Animals have this instinct too. For example, if you give a piece of meat to a cat, it will eat it in a very relaxed way. But if the cat steals the meat, it will run away and hide in a corner watching if you are going to chase it or not. Doesn't it know that it was doing something right in the first scenario, and doing something wrong in the second? In other words, it was able to distinguish good and evil, what is permissible and what is not. Also the dog will come and play with his master when it has done something good, asking him for a reward. But when it misbehaves, the dog will stay away, as if it regrets what it has done. God the creator illustrates such a fact in the Quran:

﴿Have We not shown him the two paths (of good and evil)?﴾ AlBalad (90:8)

Signs & Trials

God has assigned men as “Prophets” to guide mankind, and show them the path that leads to paradise, and there are “pious scholars” who follow the path of the prophets and teach others to follow it. On the other hand, there are devils who invite people to the path of hellfire.

Inviting people to the path of paradise is a difficult task, because of the embedded desire for freedom with no boundaries, and the restraints set by religion. Whereas attracting people to the other path is very easy, because it fulfills our appetite without any limits or restrictions. Man’s behavior towards his desires can be described as follows, imagine if you have a tank of water on top of a mountain, if you make a hole in the tank, the water will flow down the hill easily without any effort just how man follow his appetite. Now if you try to pump the water back up to the top of the mountain, you will need generators and so much effort to take the water back to the tank, which is similar to how man resist his appetite, it is an uncomfortable exercise and requires so much effort.

Those who spread evil don’t have to spend much effort in order to call others to their path. While the ones who invite people to the right path and attempt to teach them self-discipline, will have to swim against the flow and exert tremendous effort. Such as the reminder that comes from a pious friend, when a beautiful woman passes by and automatically your desire to look and stare will be triggered, but your pious friend reminds you not to look and you might feel uncomfortable to resist yourself and lower your gaze. Or a businessman accumulating wealth easily through interest, but again the pious friend interferes and asks you to stop. A pious friend will always remind you, to avoid all these temporary temptations, and to wait until you win them in the life after, to believe in the hereafter and in the unseen, to resist your ego, and to control your desires. His reminders are hard and bitter, and don’t be surprised when I say they are undoubtedly difficult, because God describes that in the Quran:

﴿Behold, we shall bestow upon you a heavy message﴾ AlMuzzammil (73:5)

And all noble acts require so much discipline. For example, a student who stays away from playing to study and prepare for an exam is such a heavy duty, a knowledge seeker would leave social gatherings and get busy with studying is also a heavy duty, to wake up for Fajr (Dawn)

prayer is also a heavy duty. Therefore we find there are far more unrighteous people than the righteous ones. Hence, following the majority blindly can sometimes be harmful.

﴿If you follow the majority of those (who live) on earth, they will but lead you astray from the path of God﴾ AlAnam (6:116)

If scarcity is not a quality of superiority, diamonds would not be hard to find and coal would not be in such abundance. Nor would great men of genius, brave heroes and men of distinction be so few among any nation.

The Nature of Mankind

Prophets and their followers, in particular the pious scholars, are the callers to paradise, while evil and its supporters from the ones who are corrupt among the people are the callers to hell fire. We have within ourselves, supporters for the first callers, and supporters for the latter ones. We might ask the question, “what is intellect and what is the self³?” I won’t claim that I have the exact description for each, it still needs to be discovered. We sometimes say “I’ve believe” or “my intellect says”, so what is yourself and what is your intellect?

If you are sleeping in winter, covered with warm blanket, and the alarm goes off to wake you up for dawn prayer, a voice inside of you will tell you “Get up for prayer”. When you decide to get up, another voice comes and says “sleep a little bit more”, the first voice comes back and says “prayer is better than sleeping”, the second voice will come again and say “there is enough time, sleep for few minutes”, and the two voices will keep coming one after the other. The first voice is your mind, the second is your self (Nafs). It is an experience that is repeated thousand times, in several shapes and forms. Whenever a person confronts a prohibited act and his “nafs” leans towards it, if there is faith in his heart, his mind will try convince him to resist. The more faith you have, the stronger you can resist and listen to your mind.

That does not mean you will always be able to overcome yourself, and you will never commit a sin. Islam is a religion that recognizes the nature of human being. The reality, God has creatures that are only meant to worship him and they don’t commit a single sin, and those are the Angels, so God didn’t create us as Angels. Also God has creatures that are meant to disobey him and those are the devils, and God has not created us to be devils. And God created animals that have no intellect and have only instincts. Consequently, they will not be accountable and will not be questioned in the Day of Judgment.

So who are we? what is mankind?

The human being is a special creature, he has some attributes from the angles, some from the devils, and some from animals. So if he delves into worshipping God regularly, the heart gets more and more purified, and he will taste the sweetness of faith, and the angelic attributes he has will dominate. However, if he denies the creator, associates partners with God, the satanic character will dominate. And if man gets controlled by anger, where his blood pressure goes up, and wishes to kill and take revenge, he will be more like an animal.

³ In Arabic it is called (Nafs), which is separate from the soul and the mind.

This is the truth of human being, he has natural inclination towards good and evil. God gave him both options, the intellect to distinguish good from evil, and the willpower to follow one of the options. Consequently, if you use your intellect wisely, take the right decision and act upon it, your inclination towards doing good keeps strengthening until it becomes a habit, and you will be among the ones who prosper in the life after, otherwise you will be among the punished ones.

What is intellect? It is a bind. The word intellect in Arabic is “Akil”, which means from a linguistic perspective the rope used to steer the camel. Also the word “Hikmah” in Arabic which is wisdom, one of its meanings, is to have control. Civilisation also implies setting laws and boundaries for what people can do, it makes you respect the rights of other people and the tradition of the society you live in. Justice also means control, because it set the boundary for your freedom, where the freedom of your neighbour starts.

Also sins are tempting, we enjoy listening to gossip because it makes you feel better than the one whose weaknesses and mistakes are being exposed. Theft can also be a pleasure, because you profit without any effort. Adultery is also enjoyable because you respond to the sexual desire, cheating also can be enjoyable because you achieve success easily. Every one of us has committed a sin, and maybe enjoyed it. At the very least, we skipped dawn prayer and remained in the bed, and the moments that were enjoyed while sleeping are gone and forgotten. We all performed rituals that endured pain and hard work, such as thirst and hunger in Ramadan, what is left from that pain during Ramadan that we felt years back? Nothing. The pleasures of sins will vanish, but what remains is punishment. Whereas all the pain accompanied with performing duties is gone, and what remains is the reward.

Death

Every believer wishes to repent and get close to God, but keeps delaying. I used to say, when I perform Hajj, I will repent. I did perform Hajj and didn't repent. I used to say, if I reach the age of forty, I will repent. I have reached the age of forty and didn't repent. I don't mean repentance in this context, to stop committing major sins, I mean we constantly seek to improve and purify ourselves, but we setback thinking that death is too far. I've been near-death twice and regretted every moment was not spent in doing good. However, when I escaped the near-death experience, I remained cautious for few month and then again I forgot death.

We all forget death, we see people die every day, but we never imagine that one day we will die. We stand at the funeral praying, while we are thinking about our life matters! No matter how long we live, we will eventually die. So why don't we remember death, and prepare for it when we know it is inevitable. If a person is planning to travel, he will start preparing from the moment a date has been fixed until his departure. I was once in the company of some Jordanian teachers, who had signed contracts for employment in Saudi Arabia. They were informed that flights were booked and to start preparation, and the flights will not be rescheduled. Those who had prepared themselves in time were able to leave as planned, as soon as they were called to leave. But those who needed more time for preparation had missed the flight. So what can we say about a task that cannot be avoided, assigned to the Angel of Death to depart our soul. The Angel of Death will take you even if you are unhappy and unwilling to go with him. Who knows when the Angel of Death will come?

What is death? What does it feel like? Human life has stages: the first stage is the embryo in the womb; then life on earth followed by the stage of barzakh (the period between death and resurrection). Finally, the hereafter, which is the eternal life. Each stage has the same degree of relativity to the one next to it. The vastness of this life when compared to the narrow space in the mother's womb is like the vastness of the barzakh when compared to life in the world; the same goes for the vastness of the life in the hereafter when compared to the barzakh. When a child is in the embryonic form, he thinks that his entire world is his mother's womb. If the embryo were asked to leave the womb, he might think it is the end. Hence, death can be imagined as a new birth. It is an exit into another domain which is longer and wider in terms of time and space. The world we live in is only a place of transit. Our worldly life is similar to the life of a migrant going to the United States by ship. He pays for a luxurious cabin and makes arrangements to ensure he will have a comfortable trip. But do you think he would bother to spend all his money renovating the cabin and to arrive the United States broke? Or would he say to himself: "I'll be

staying in this cabin for a week, so I might as well enjoy what's available and save my money for my home in the States as 'that is where will be my permanent residence”.

The believer is aware of what is to come in the hereafter and therefore prepares for it by living a life of repentance and obedience. This does not mean that Islam calls upon every Muslim to completely give up life and all responsibilities. Islam does not say that we should always be at the mosque; nor does it say that we should isolate ourselves from society. However, Islam encourages and commands Muslims to build the best civilization, and to strive to be among the most successful, as well as to take a lead among scientists. Islam teaches every Muslim to lead a balanced and healthy life, taking care of your body by eating proper food and keeping fit. Islam advises Muslims to enjoy life and relax, as long as he does not cross the boundaries set by Islam. Islam instructs the Muslim to take care of his family and carry all required duties in the society. In other words, a Muslim may enjoy all good things in life, provided that he remains true to his faith, avoids whatever is deemed to be unlawful, and performs all his religious duties. Wealth should be in a Muslim's hands and not in his heart, because his dependence should be on God and not on material possessions, and his one and only purpose in life should be to seek God's satisfaction.

What is Islam

I once asked my students the following question: "If someone asks you to explain Islam in an hour, what would you do?" The response: "That would be impossible, he would have to study the principle of the Oneness of God, the Holy Quran, the hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him), and the Islamic law. I said, "Glory be to God! What about the simple Bedouin who came once to our Prophet and learned all about Islam Just by staying in his company for a day or even less? Don't you remember how our Prophet explained our religion in three brief sentences? He spoke about Iman (faith), Islam (the religion) and Ihsan⁴ (Excellence). So why is it then, that we can't explain our religion these days in an hour?

What is Islam and how does one become a Muslim? Every creed, whether its principles are based on truth or falsehood, every society, good or bad, and every political party, regardless of whether its intentions are noble or not, operates on certain basic principles and understanding that define its goal and outline its course of action. These principles become like a constitution to guide its members and followers. Anyone wishing to become a member would need to study and understand these guidelines. If he is convinced, and believes in their validity, he will decide to join and become one of its members and supporters. Consequently, he has to obey the constitution, pay the membership fee, and commit to the principles and guidelines. This means he has to review them constantly, and to set an example through his character and behavior. The membership can be described as: Knowledge of its system, belief in its principles, adherence to its regulations, and to live a life according to those principles and regulations. Whoever wishes to embrace Islam has to accept its principles with total conviction. The principles are:

- The material world is not the whole existence, and there is another life beyond this life.
- Man existed before he was born and will continue to exist after death.
- Man did not create himself but had been created before he was conscious of his existence, and the inanimate objects around him couldn't have been created him, as he is a rational being and they are not, and everything in this universe was created from nothingness by one God, God the Almighty.

⁴Ihsan linguistically means Perfection, excellence or to beautify.

Ihsan can also mean your conscience when it is constantly alive and reminds you of God, which results in watching your actions and preventing yourself from doing immoral actions.

- God is the only one who grants life and allows death. It is He who created everything, and if He wishes to destroy the whole universe nothing will stop him.
- God Almighty is not similar to his creation in any way. He existed before this creation and He is eternal and has knowledge that nothing can be hidden from him. His justice is absolute. He created the laws of nature that have precise measurement. He created man, and provided him with willpower and intellect to able to choose and take action.
- God has created an eternal life, where the doer of good will be rewarded with a life in paradise and the wrong doer will be punished with hellfire.
- There is only one God, no one is worth of worship except him. All forms of worship are directed to God alone. All the material beings that we can see and feel, have been created by Him. He has also created invisible living beings. Among them are the angels, who are meant to do good only; and there are the devils, who are meant to do evil only. Among Mankind are the prophets, whom God selects and reveals his message to, they will carry it and invite humanity to it.
- The message includes books and scriptures, the later overcomes the previous one. The last book is the Quran, other books have been distorted, lost or forgotten, but the Quran is protected and remains authentic. The last prophet is Mohamed the son Abdullah, an Arab from the tribe of Quraish, the seal of the prophets, with no other prophets to come after.
- The Quran is the constitution of Islam. Whoever believes that it has been revealed by God and believes in everything in it, becomes a (believer). Belief in this context can be only seen by God because human beings cannot see what's in the heart. Therefore it is essential, in order to be accepted as a Muslim, that a man declares his faith by pronouncing the two Statements: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of God". The moment he pronounces this statement he becomes a Muslim, he is entitled to all the rights enjoyed by Muslims, and agrees to perform all the duties enjoined upon him by Islam.
- These duties are few and simple:
 1. Five obligatory daily prayers, the performing of which will not, all together, take more than half an hour a day. They do not require a certain place or a specific person to be present, there is no intermediate between you and your creator, you pray to you Lord directly.
 2. There is one month during the year, where the Muslim fasts and abstains from eating and drinking from dawn until sunset. Fasting purifies the heart, relaxes the

stomach, strengthens the discipline, and improves the health. This month resembles unity and equality among the Muslims, and revives the spirit of cooperating in doing the good.

3. If a Muslim has excessive wealth, which is an amount that gets saved for one year after all expenditures, he is obligated to give 2.5% of that amount to the government to be spent mainly in helping the poor and the needy. This duty keeps the community away from the disease of poverty, and supports the poor to become a better community member.
4. There are specific social gatherings for the Muslims. The prayer in congregation at the mosque that each prayer does not take more than 15 minutes. If a Muslim is not able to attend the congregation prayer, and prays at home, he will lose the reward. Another form of gathering is the Friday weekly prayer, which does not last for more than an hour, and it is obligatory on Men.

Also the Eid payer which is twice a year, and the biggest gathering is the pilgrimage, which is obligatory on every Muslim to do it once in lifetime if he can.

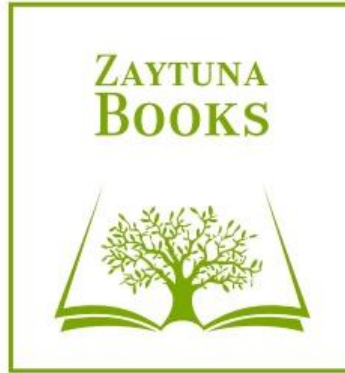
On the other side, there are actions which are considered by logic as evil that a believer should not commit. Such actions are killing, accusing or attacking others, injustice in all its forms, any substance that damages our intellect, adultery, usury, lying, cheating, betrayal, mistreating the parents, false witnessing. In case a Muslim neglects some of the duties or commits any of the evil acts, he will be forgiven if he repents and asks God for forgiveness. Even if he does not repent, he will still be considered as a Muslim, but he is taking a high risk, and the chances of getting punished by God are really high. In case a Muslim denies and disbelieves in any of the major principles, or denies a word mentioned in the Quran, he is not a Muslim anymore. Hence, there is a clear distinction between a Muslim who does not comply with duties due to weakness or laziness and another who rejects a duty or a principle due to disbelief. Also, faith in Islam cannot be divided, a Muslim cannot believe in some of the principles and denies some, he has to fully believe in all parts of faith.

A Muslim can be a non-believer, if he attends all the gatherings, pays the membership fees and does all the required duties, not based on conviction, but to spy and spread corruption. In that case, he is called a hypocrite, who declares the statements of faith, carries out all the obligatory rituals, while he does not believe in any of his actions. He will still be considered a Muslim, because we do not know what is in his heart, and God alone can see his hidden reality.

In summary, if a person believes in the foundations and principles of Islam, such as the belief in God as the only creator and the only one to be worshipped, the belief in the angels, the prophets, the revealed books, destiny, and he declares the statements of faith, performed the daily obligatory prayers, performed the fasting in the month of Ramadan; paid the zakat, performed the Haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca once in a lifetime if he can, and abstained from everything that is forbidden, consequently he becomes a Muslim and a believer.

The real fruits of faith and believing can never be achieved, and the sweetness of faith can never be truly tasted, until the Muslim lives a life and behaves according to the principles of Islam. That sweetness gets manifested in the believer's life, when he always remembers the creator in all circumstances, while working and sleeping, while being in public or in private, in all times he remembers that the creator is aware of all your thoughts and actions, when he seeks help sincerely from God and supplicates to him with humbleness.

The prophet Mohamed peace be upon him summarized all these meanings in the concept of (Ihasn) as: "To worship God as if you see God, and if you do not see God you know that God sees you"



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